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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the elements of university-school collaboration based on several field experiences that university students have had in area schools in connection with education classes often taught in those schools. These elements can serve as a guide to determine a university's or school's readiness for collaboration and identify potential barriers to success. This report presents the processes, elements, and characteristics necessary for collaboration, which include: trust/responsibility; time/commitment; accountability; mutuality/reciprocity; choice/ownership/meaningfulness; shared vision/beliefs; flexibility/adaptability; challenge/openness to growth; respect; and communication/sensitivity. After a discussion of each issue, the report presents thought-provoking questions to facilitate the deliberation of each issue within a collaborative relationship. (SM)

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University/School Collaboration: A Case Study

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University/School Collaboration: A Case Study

Abstract

This paper describes the elements of university / school collaboration centered on several field experiences that university students have in area schools in connection with education classes that are often taught in those schools. These elements can serve as guide to determine a university / school readiness for collaboration and identify potential barriers to success. These elements are trust / responsibility, time / commitment, accountability, mutuality / reciprocity, choice / ownership / meaningfulness, shared vision / beliefs, flexibility / adaptability, challenge / openness to growth, respect and communication / sensitivity.

Both schools, colleges and departments of education (SCDEs) and K-12 schools are in need of improvement. SCDEs and K-12 schools have much to offer each other and can serve a vehicles for mutual improvement. School improvement efforts generally generate controversy and conflict, which if not handled well can greatly limit effectiveness (Hatch, 1998). Carrying out such improvements when it involves collaboration between university and public school personnel is particularly challenging. Differences in activities, cultures, reward systems, schedules and goals are among the many possible sources of conflict. Differences in the theories of action, especially when different partners and institutions are involved, are considered another source of conflict (Hatch, 1998).

SCDEs are in the business of preparing teachers for K-12 schools, and K-12 schools are in the business of preparing responsible citizens for society. Both preparations are often based more on traditional practices than on science. Learner-centered psychological principles (McCombs and Whisler, 1997) suggest that both preservice teachers and K-12 students in more traditional teacher-centered education settings are not being taught in the best ways. University and K-12 teachers' collaboration and cooperation can help all of their students better grow, develop and learn. Teacher education students will be better prepared for the real world of teaching, and K-12 students will get more assistance to prepare for the real world of living.

Improving SCDE's and K-12 schools requires a holistic focus of schools as learning organizations (Senge, 1994; Goodlad, 1990) that are continually enhancing their capacity to create success for all students (O'Neill, 1995) through renewal of individual and collective competencies (Goodlad, 1990). Education reform must be based on an equal partnership between schools and universities allowing practicing teachers to work with preservice teachers on a consistent and long term basis. Reform efforts fail for lack of these collaborative opportunities for new learning to occur and sustained support for experimentation and reflection (Goodlad, 1990).

This study is conceptually based on a learning organization model of

collaborative personnel preparation that describes the elements of university/school collaboration. The main focus of this reform effort has centered on several field experiences that university students have in area schools. These experiences have been developed to help prepare teacher education students apply what they are learning in the University to the real world of practice and to help area youth get more assistance in their learning. These experiences with K-12 students, classrooms, and schools help preservice teachers better understand teaching and practice teaching effectively.

Students in teacher education spend time as part of their methods courses in K-12 classrooms assisting teachers and children with school work, observing how discipline is maintained, teachers teach, and students learn. They develop insights into the roles of schools and teachers. They begin to understand the complex nature of teaching, learning and classroom management, and the part culture plays in education. New knowledge is integrated into teacher preparation and continuing teacher education.

Collaboration Facilitation Guide and Checklist

The process of developing and maintaining collaborative relationships between and within school and university communities is complex. Some elements for creating collaborative communities are listed below. These elements can be used as guide and a checklist to determine a university/school readiness for collaboration. They can identify potential barriers to success and questions that might be useful in facilitating collaborative relationships.

Most of these elements were intuitively applied in the collaborative process between Northern Michigan University Department of Education and K-12 schools. Whitman Elementary School of the Marquette Area Public Schools is the school with whom NMU has had the closest relationship. The closer the relationship, the more important the collaborative elements became.

On reflection, they seem to have been the key components. All were needed to a minimal degree. Some were more apparent at the beginning of the collaboration. All have become more important as the level of collaboration increased. Most of them are intimately related to others and can only be properly understood and treated as elements of a whole. Some may seem contradictory, like the need for unity and diversity, but finding the proper balance among them is part of the process.

These qualities are not easily acquired, especially by adults or institutions. Collaboration is a process, not an event. A long-term view and a systematic approach are vital to advancing that process. It works best when it creates a win/win relationship.

University/school collaboration can be compared to a marriage: there should

be compatibility, attraction, respect and love. An arranged marriage can work if both parties accept it. There may be a honeymoon period, but there will be problems that will have to be overcome mutually. Like in a marriage, often those problems involve money, time, resources, feelings, perceptions and what is best for the children. The more enduring and serious the relationship, the more likelihood for challenges and benefits.

Meanings, beliefs, understandings and interpretations of these characteristics are generally based on previous experiences. A balance between unity and diversity needs to be maintained. Both are important to a healthy collaboration. If they are not found in sufficient quantity in a collaborative relationship, then that relationship will suffer from too much divisiveness or from lack of the elements needed to make a healthy system. Unity in diversity in shared expertise, decision making, knowledge and vision can create a dynamic for growth. Trust, communications, respect, choice and the other elements are all part of creating and maintaining unity. The members are united, but bring different abilities, interests and responsibilities. This positive interdependence enriches everyone.

Collaboration depends on leaders to communicate vision, build trust, manage conflicts, balance interests and facilitate group interactions. They must demonstrate, engender and encourage the necessary conditions for collaboration. This is often done at an intuitive level, but conscious knowledge allows for better analysis and evaluation of the processes so that more effective functioning results. Below are the processes, elements and characteristics found necessary for collaboration. Questions that might be used as a checklist to determine readiness for collaboration between university and school are given in italics at the end of each element.

Trust/Responsibility

A minimal level of trust, responsibility and trustworthiness is necessary if a productive relationship is to be established and maintained. This takes time and effort and is built partly through mutual sharing of resources, ideas and concerns. How individuals respond to difficult situations demonstrates responsibility and determines trust. Past actions influence present conditions and future expectations. When ties of trust and friendship have been established and invested in, a surplus account is created from which may be drawn upon if needed.

Is there a nonthreatening relationship among the partners? Do you trust the partners? Are they responsible?

Time/Commitment

It takes time to create and maintain a relationship. Finding time is often a major challenge. Time may be needed to build common goals and perceptions. Time is required for the parties to become clear about their ideas and beliefs. Difficulties

can be expected if the details of the collaboration are not handled efficiently. Commitment is related to trust and responsibility. Commitments need to be honored as much as possible. Perseverance is also related to commitment, as the parties will need to work through the challenging, difficult times. If commitment is low, then the likelihood to remain engaged or be successful is also low. Commitment is related to all of the conditions, both drawing on them and contributing to them.

Do you have the time needed to develop a successful collaboration? Do you want to take the time? Will you? How committed are the parties? What evidence of commitment do you have? Do the parties do what they say they will do?

Accountability

Being accountable for actions and agreements is an aspect of commitment, trust and responsibility. Based on trust and respect, individual members hold one another accountable for their actions. Some ways of monitoring growth and concerns are needed. This is most effective when the standards of accountability are generated and maintained by the individuals involved, as this leads to self-directed and self-monitored participants. If things are not going well, individuals and groups can monitor the problems and their thinking about it. Keeping positive and being proactive is important. Feedback should be sought and responded to appropriately by all parties so they can better evaluate the effectiveness of their actions. A systematic, methodical plan should be developed. This may need to be loose and frequently adjusted, but it gives a structure which can be communicated to all parties and a foundation from which to work. An accountability plan helps to identify roles, responsibilities and resources, and allows for monitoring and evaluation.

What formal or informal evaluation is expected? How will this be accomplished? If someone does not fulfilling their obligations, do you feel free to address this concern? Are the roles, responsibilities and resources clear?

Mutuality/Reciprocity

Each party should see and realize some benefit from the partnership. Though different, the mission and goals of each party are furthered because of the collaboration. The collaboration should respond to the institutional and individual needs so that all parties win. In university/school collaboration, it is especially important the students in both institutions benefit. As this sense of mutuality develops, each party becomes more responsible to the others for accomplishing their respective objectives.

How will the university faculty and students be working to help the school teachers' students succeed? How will the school teachers be working to help the university students succeed? Is it a win / win arrangement? What will we and they get out of this collaboration?

Choice/Ownership/Meaningfulness

It may be professionally irresponsible to not collaborate on some level with fellow professionals, but ideally all parties should have a choice in what happens and feel that participating and activities are their choice. This includes some ownership for the goals, students, accountability and responsibilities. Leaders can facilitate collaboration, and if necessary, require it, but voluntary participation is clearly preferable. If team members do not feel some sense of ownership, their contributions to the team will be adversely affected. Choice and ownership depend on the meaningfulness of the goals and objectives. When parties are pursuing personally relevant goals and tasks, they feel some personal control, have positive affect, are more likely to persevere and are more motivated to succeed.

Did the people involved have a say? Will they be consulted with throughout? What evidence do you have that all parties buy into the plans and process? Do they value what is trying to be done?

SharedVision/Beliefs

The collaborators share a vision/beliefs of what is good education and how to help all students learn. They also share the belief that working together is to their mutual benefit. Some groundwork is often necessary to achieve this condition. Discussions sharing the participants' visions and beliefs are essential, recognizing that each individual will construct meaning based on their unique experiences, knowledge, feelings and roles. Sharing literature or other external bodies of information about education can facilitate these conversations. Working on a project of mutual benefit can also be a vehicle to establishing a basis of agreement. In university/school collaboration, the shared value of theory and practice being integrated is important.

Do you know what the other parties vision and beliefs are about good education? About the collaboration? Are they close enough to yours to be compatible?

Flexibility/Adaptability

The members must be flexible as adjustments will need to be made. Changes in structures, schedules, curricula and relationships are to be expected, especially when a better way becomes apparent. Flexibility is not impulsivity, which should be restrained, especially as impulses are bound to conflict. Not only should individuals be open to viewing situations differently from traditional or commonly accepted practice, they should generate flexible and new ways of seeing things. It is especially important to be able to view situations from other points of view in collaborative activities.

Can the parties easily adjust to changes? What evidence exists that the parties are flexible and adaptable?

Challenge/Openness to Growth

Collaboration can aid the parties to function closer to their optimal level. If the parties are not open to challenge, then the invention, growth, flexibility and change required will be hampered. New learnings that challenge old ideas can be expected. Humility, volition and a propensity for action to push the limits of knowledge and ability are needed. Change is the only thing of which we can be certain. Some people are more open to it than others and some are better equipped to take charge of the change process. Expectations for success will influence willingness to be open to challenge. As knowledge and abilities increase, so does enthusiasm, confidence, courage and perseverance. Individuals and institutions should be able to see and consider other points of view.

Are members open to developing their practice and understanding? How have the institutions and individuals involved in the collaboration met moral, social and educational challenges in the past? Do the participants want to improve and are they willing to make the efforts needed for improvement?

Respect

All collaborators should respect one another, even when they differ or disagree. The parties, though differing in expertise and experience, respect the contribution of others. Parties are treated equitably, not as superiors and inferiors. This respect should also be manifested in relations with students, parents and other parties. Personal and institutional interests, values and goals are also to be respected, and as needed, accommodated. Negative affect, beliefs and expectations will interfere with collaboration, especially if they are intense and unjustified. Team members can take a position when the situation warrants it, but do it respectfully and with an open mind. Respecting each person's unique talents, personalities and potential is valued.

Are participants treated fairly and with respect? Do you respect the other parties?

Communication/Sensitivity

Responding appropriately to others' feelings and thinking communicates respect. This requires the ability to adequately assess what others are thinking and feeling, and then communicating appropriately. We should be sensitive to others and find ways to respond so that the chances for a successful outcome are maximized. Interpersonal communications must reflect the conditions necessary for collaboration: equitable, open, useful, accurate, honest, clear. Language used should convey information in a way understood by others, recognizing different organizational and individual realities. Collaboration and learning are facilitated by opportunities to positively interact. Listening to and understanding others before having to speak and be understood is essential. Negotiation, cooperation,

consultation, consensus and compromise are important skills. Leaders should seek and respond appropriately to feedback.

Do the collaborators listen to you? Do you listen to them? Do you seem to understand each other? Have you felt that you could be open and frank with collaborators without hurting their feelings or being misunderstood?

Conclusion

The finding of Konecki (1998) concerning the beliefs needed by PDS Professor/Coordinators in university/school collaboration support and extend the qualities found in NMU's collaborative relationships. The university liaison in a university/school collaboration appears to play a key role. The beliefs and qualities needed by the professor/collaborator are the same needed by all collaborators. Konecki identifies the following core beliefs important to collaboration: commitment and follow through, communication, consistency, everyone is of worth, flexibility, humility, involvement, patience, persistence/perseverance, positive/hopeful attitude, respect, risk-taking, self-efficacy, trust, and understanding. Based on these core beliefs, professor/coordinators in collaborative relationships should communicate effectively, demonstrate commitment, be willing to follow through, have a positive/hopeful attitude, be flexible, want to get involved, be persistent, persevere, be trustworthy, show respect, and demonstrate humility (Konecki, 1998).

It is my belief that if the participants do not have these qualities to a minimal degree, than collaboration will be of limited productivity. These are not qualities that can be pretended or easily adopted. If the participants do not possess them in adequate degree before the collaborative relationship, it is unlikely that the collaboration will be able to engender them. My advice to those considering a university/school collaboration is to find partners who possess these traits as a first criterion. Knowledge, skills and resource are more easily acquired than these more fundamental character traits.

If we are interested in training teachers for collaboration we may need to pay more attention to helping potential collaborators understand and develop of these traits. Team development and barrier removal strategies are recommended. This might be accomplished through more emphasis on communication, organization, human relations and personal development skills. This is a difficult task. It is easier to select preservice and inservice teachers who already possess these dispositions.

Crowell (1998) analyzed the same critical incidents as part of the same research project as Konecki (Simmons, Konecki, Crowell, and Gates-Duffield, 1998) and found the university coordinators studied to be: cautious in another culture, visionary, action-oriented, open, listeners, accepting of others' points of view, flexible, able to handle stress, helpful, hard workers and non-ego oriented. These dispositions

"all appear to be important in doing this boundary crossing work" (p. 2). These dispositions seem to be characteristic in people who are secure in themselves and are mature. Ego-centered, selfish and insecure people need not apply.

Both Crowell and Konecki's findings are supported in our collaboration with area schools. Their beliefs and dispositions are similar to the ones identified independently by us.

Johnston (1997) states: "The ideas of *difference, tensions,* and *dialogue* are central to the work of our PDS [Professional Development School]. Put simply, our most significant learning seems to emerge out of our dialogic efforts to surface and explore the tensions related to our differences (p. 9)." These ideas were also found in our collaborative efforts, thought to a less extent as tensions were minimized because of the apparent value of the collaboration to the participants and the differences were seen as a positive value. Our most significant learning was the benefit to our preservice teachers in developing sound professional understanding and practice.

The value of the collaboration for our teacher education program has been immense. It has infused a spirit of excellence and service into our program and greatly increased quality of preparation that our preservice teachers receive. Students and teachers in both institutions are benefitting from the increased professional collaboration. They have become allies to reform and renew education, and are redefining the ways that K-12 schools and SCDEs interact with one another to improve education for their respective students.

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